

# **Empowering Students Through Service-Learning in a Community Psychology Course: A Case in Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

This article chronicles a service-learning (SL) subject on community psychology in Hong Kong ( $n = 26$ ) and elaborates on how students experience concepts, frameworks, and values in community psychology and put them into practice at service-learning settings. Upon acquiring basic concepts in community psychology, including sense of community, empowerment, human diversity, and social capital, students engaged in 40 hours of service-learning sessions that included assigned community services and independent SL projects addressing both community needs and students' strengths. Learning reported by students in terms of experiential acquisition of community psychology concepts, personal empowerment, and implications on their service-learning practices are discussed with reference to Zimmerman's (1995) conceptual framework of personal empowerment. Students' interpersonal, interactional, and behavioral outcomes from their service-learning experiences are detailed.

## **Introduction**

**E**xperiencing service-learning as an extension and pedagogy for learning and practicing community psychology is imperative for students to learn both the "science" and "practice" of psychology (Duffy & Bringle, 1998). *Service-learning* (SL) in this context refers to credit-bearing educational experience that mobilizes students in service catering to community needs while reflecting on their experience to deepen their understanding, appreciation, and application of the subject matter. Apart from the intended learning outcome, SL also serves to foster an enhanced sense of civic responsibility among students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). An emerging body of recent research has associated SL with various positive effects in students (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001) including learning outcomes, such as academic performance (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000); social outcomes, such as positive changes in sense of civic responsibility (Singer, King, Green, & Barr, 2002); and personal outcomes in areas like self-efficacy and moral development (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Eyler et al., 2001). Nonetheless, the process and nature of empowerment taking place

in the SL context, with particular reference to what students and teaching staff from the university can learn from the projects and service organizations (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Konwerski & Nashman, 2002), remains an area that could be enhanced with further research from SL settings.

Psychological empowerment is a dynamic concept that is heavily context-specific. It refers to how individuals in specific community settings develop skills, mobilize resources, and are affected by community involvement and participation (Zimmerman, 1995). Although community members usually receive the spotlight in SL projects, how students themselves have become active learners in the process is often overlooked (Munter, 2002). In the case of SL, the significance of such empowerment processes and outcomes in students and their service recipients have been addressed as a call to focus on what students learn from the SL experience (Munter, 2002; Werner, 1998).

Psychological empowerment of service recipients and students in this subject can be conceived in terms of three levels of outcomes: interpersonal, interactional, and behavioral. Interpersonal outcomes center around individual-level changes, including perceived competence and a sense of mastery in community work. Interactional outcomes include the development of critical awareness about resources and skills required for community intervention and understanding of causal agents in community issues. Behavioral outcomes include activities such as community involvement and participation (Zimmerman, 1995).

This article serves to integrate students' reflections on their own personal outcomes with their learning of community psychology as an academic subject. The personal outcomes, related to the concept of psychological empowerment, are illustrated in the context of a nomological network for conceptualizing the construct (Zimmerman, 1995) to yield a contextualized discourse illustrating the processes and outcomes in SL.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Students from a service-learning course on community psychology at a university in Hong Kong were evaluated. With a class size of 26, comprising 17 females and nine males, students came from 12 diverse academic disciplines in the university, including language, business, engineering, and tourism majors. Students par-

ticipated in the community service components as designated in the subject for 6 weeks during the 14-week subject span. All students were attached to a single partner community organization with a strong focus on health promotion in its neighborhood. The partner community organization serves an aging community that is densely populated with seniors over age 65 and contains a significant proportion of economically deprived and ethnically diverse families. An exemption from ethical approval was obtained from an institutional review board (IRB) body equivalent at the authors' host institution given the the study's focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning and the masked identities of the students involved.

## **Service-Learning Subject**

Prior to their service-learning sessions, all students in this SL subject attended six classroom-based lectures on fundamental concepts and frameworks in community psychology: (1) definition of community psychology as a discipline and its relationship with community science, (2) defining and operationalizing different types of community, (3) social capital and community, (4) understanding human diversity and social inequality, (5) empowerment in the community context/social change in the community, and (6) prevention program development and evaluation in a community setting. Apart from the content lectures on major tenets of community psychology, students also received preservice training before embarking on their 6-week SL sessions, under supervision by teaching staff and a designated supervisor at the partner community organization.

The students' learning processes were closely monitored and assessed through various channels. Students' reflection on the process in the form of reflective journals, project blogs, and project presentations counted for 40% of their overall assessment. Acquisition of community psychology concepts and their application (45% of the grade) were evaluated via an application report and a funding proposal of community intervention to assess their implementation of concepts learned and program development skills. Students' SL performance evaluation by subject instructors and partnering agency supervisors constituted the remaining 15% of assessment grades.

## Description of the Service-Learning Activities in the Community Psychology Subject

The 40-hour community service-learning comprised two sets of activities: mandatory home visits at the service community assigned by the service agency and independent projects proposed by the students. Collaborating with the subject instructors, students nurtured their initial ideas about the nature and purpose of service projects while gaining familiarity with the local community from their mandatory activities, which provided face-to-face encounters with community members in the district served by the partner organization. The incubated ideas were then aligned with the reception and needs as revealed by the partner community organization, with those that met community needs and were well-received by the partner organization being brought into implementation. Working in small groups of four to eight, the students completed the mandatory and independent SL requirements in a span of about 6 weeks. Details of the assigned activities and the student-developed activities for each project group are listed in Table 1.

It is worth noting that students utilized their personal expertise as well as strength from their academic disciplines in the provision of service. For example, a student group with the majority coming from the Department of Fashion and Textiles organized a scarf tie-dying workshop for the housewives at the center, whereas the group of students experienced with computer knowledge offered a computer class for the elderly in the area.

Both the mandatory home visits that provided hands-on exposure to community members and the independent projects that called for collaboration with the community partner organization were designed to raise the students' awareness regarding the community and strengthen their civic engagement and agency. In addition, participating in those activities provided an ideal platform for understanding and comprehending community psychology concepts such as sense of community, empowerment, prevention, and diversity by seamlessly corroborating these concepts and values with experience from the community and enabling students to "witness that connection firsthand" (Osborne, Weadick, & Pentecuff, 1998, p. 134). The experiential approach is consistent with the core premise of community psychology and community science, which advocates understanding of the community along with actions that bring forth changes in the setting (Wandersman, 2003). Furthermore, we have observed the intended interactional outcomes in our students throughout the SL experience, such as improvement in

team-building skills, effective communication skills, and problem-solving skills at the SL settings.

**Table 1. Service-Learning Activities Performed by Students**

	Activities assigned by service agency	Activities held by students
Group 1 (n = 6)	<i>Home visit for Cho Yiu Housing Estate</i> Local residents were assessed on their needs for community health service (e.g., screening, long-term medication compliance, healthy lifestyle interventions).	Scarf tie-dye workshop Students organized and conducted a workshop for local residents on do-it-yourself (DIY) tie-dying with natural dye materials such as onion peel and red cabbage.
Group 2 (n = 7)	<i>Home visit for solitary elderly in Lai King Estate</i> In addition to assessing the community health needs as in the Cho Yiu Housing Estate visits, information pertaining to the needs of solitary elderly, including instrumental support and social support, was collected and assessed.	<i>South Asian youth development in the community</i> A pilot community assessment of health and social needs among the Pakistani community in the housing estate, with particular attention to bilingual (Pakistani languages and Chinese) teenagers and housewives who do not speak Chinese at all.
Group 3 (n = 8)	<i>Care for the elderly raffle</i> Students participated in the raffle ticket sales while coordinating with other local volunteers in the community at various stations during their sessions for exposure to the community settings and the residents.	<i>Rummikub competition for elders</i> Students organized and conducted a tournament of the board game Rummikub to promote community involvement and engage seniors in mental exercises.
Group 4 (n = 5)	<i>Home visit for Cho Yiu Housing Estate</i> Local residents were assessed on their needs for community health service (e.g., screening, long-term medication compliance, healthy lifestyle interventions).	<i>Elderly computer/social media class</i> Two hands-on computer workshops were organized for seniors in the community. The workshops were designed to narrow the digital divide among local elders and promote intergenerational relationships by empowering seniors with social media such as Facebook and instant messaging tools to liaise with their offspring, as well as accessing digital entertainment and health information via the internet.

Contents from reflective journals of students in this class were analyzed to extract evidence of personal empowerment in students and service recipients (Zimmerman, 1995). A qualitative case study approach was adopted for extracting psychological empowerment themes from the data in students' reflective journals. Students were required to write up to four journal entries throughout their SL sessions. With reference to the model of reflective thinking proposed by Kember et al. (2000), journal entries attaining an appropriate level of reflection or critical reflection were incorporated in this study to align with the stated learning outcomes.

## Results

Reflections of personal empowerment from reflective journal entries were analyzed with the NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis package to extract nodes corresponding to four dimensions in personal empowerment (PE) in the service-learning context: (a) sense of mastery in students, (b) sense of mastery in service recipients, (c) personal empowerment from critical awareness about community issues (interactional), and (d) personal empowerment from experiencing community involvement and service participation (behavioral). Table 2 details the distributions of the observed PE dimension across entries from the 26 participating students.

**Table 2. Empowerment Types Identified Among Participating Students**

Empowerment Types	Identified	Not Identified
Mastery in service recipients	26 (100%)	0 (0%)
Mastery in students	11 (42%)	15 (58%)
Personal empowerment—critical awareness	4 (15%)	22 (85%)
Personal empowerment—community involvement	14 (54%)	12 (46%)

## Reflections on Psychological Empowerment From the Service-Learning Experience

The students submitted a total of 90 reflective journal entries. The following four entries fulfill Kember et al.'s (2000) reflective thinking criteria and highlight the notion and experience of personal empowerment.

**Fostering a sense of mastery in students.** A social policy major in this class reflected on her experience in working with the elders on how to build rapport with them and attain a sense of mastery in dealing with human diversity:

I learnt that patience is the most important thing in communicating with elderly after running this activity. In explaining the game rules, I need not one but repeated illustrations. I have to sit close enough to them so they can hear me well and speak slowly when I cover the rules and encourage them to engage in the games. Fortunately, we have enough group members to cover all participants at the event. Now I realize that how the important it is of having sufficient personnel to work with the elderly.

**Fostering a sense of mastery in service recipients.** Reporting from her tie-dyeing workshop, a fashion and textile student recalled what her clients said after attending her session:

All of them really enjoyed tie-dyeing and attempted with several rounds of hands-on practices. We were delighted to see the satisfaction on their faces with their work. Towards the end of the session, they were eager to join more advance class about tie-dyeing and even asked for an advance level extension of this tie-dyeing workshop. We wish that they can do it [tie-dyeing] with their own garment to explore and create more special tie-dye effects. We wrapped up the session with a group photo of our team, the tie-dyeing students, and our products.

**Developing critical awareness about community issues.** A number of students' reflections reported their critical awareness concerning elders' motivation to stay housebound in the housing estate they visited.

Hindered by the pain in their legs and backs, these elders seldom go out for a walk or shopping.... One elder we interviewed was a widower who lives alone, instead of living with his children and grandchildren. He has difficulty in walking, and that reminded me of the fact that perhaps the Cho Yiu Estate is not design-friendly to elders like him. Although he revealed interest in getting a blood pressure check, he withdrew his request after learning that he must go to the Community Service Center, which would cost him a 10-minute walk down the hill, which was out of his physical access. Can we do

something to improve access to health service in this community?

### **Experiencing community involvement and participation.**

From their SL experience, students were able to learn about behavioral outcomes in psychological empowerment in terms of their observed community involvement beyond merely looking into service center attendance count:

I thought the elders joined the Rummikub competition to kill time and earn a chance to win the prizes, in our case, a pack of rice for the winner and noodles for the runner-up team. We were all wrong about that. At the end of the day, we learnt that rather than earning the prizes, they were motivated in learning the game itself, engaging with other folks in the community, and spending quality time with young people like us. People in this community genuinely love hanging out with each other.

## **Discussion**

With an increasing number of universities in Hong Kong incorporating service-learning into their modes of study (A. C. M. Chan, Lee, & Ma, 2009; C. L. W. Chan & Chau, 2009; Ngai, 2006; Shek, 2010), the findings and reflections from this study illustrated that SL, in this case featuring community psychology as the subject content, generated a dynamic interplay between students and their service experience. Students earn the opportunity to observe how constructs in community psychology, such as the appreciation of human diversity and processes in community involvement, operate in their natural settings.

The SL experience enabled students to learn about and experience empowerment simultaneously. For example, after learning about empowerment in the classroom setting, students were able to augment such understanding by comparing “personal narratives from elders and textbook-based study” (Boyle-Baise & Binford, 2005, p. 152) to realize that elders in Hong Kong are often a neglected group in society, and participation in community activity, which they were engaged in personally, is a way to empower the elders in terms of their agency toward health promotion or community engagement. From the Rummikub tournament project, students learned experientially about what constituted a sense of commu-

nity from the solidarity exhibited among the elderly participants in their tournament when the elders liaised on recreational activities primarily to socialize with other local residents. At the same time, the elders also cherished the experience of establishing intergenerational relationships with the younger university students.

Meanwhile, the students themselves, a community of their own, are transformed into active observers. Their progress is not limited to their appreciation of community psychology subject matter; in fact, the empowerment processes and outcomes that these students experience while working toward their SL goals is another page worth studying in exploring this pedagogy.

Nevertheless, findings from this study are constrained by several limitations. Because it is a descriptive and explorative study, findings on personal empowerment among students through SL are subject to various confounding factors, including the students' psychological well-being and motivation. An experimental or quasi-experimental design could better examine the causal mechanism for the effect of SL on students' personal empowerment. The case study approach adopted in this study highlighted coherent reflections from students' work to illustrate how personal empowerment emerged from SL. Nonetheless, a more representative sampling strategy to embrace students' diversity in the Asian context would have extended the generalizability and ecological validity of this study.

## Conclusion

Findings from the current study provided evidence that students can benefit from service-learning in accord with psychological empowerment principles outlined by Zimmerman (1995). Aligning the observed changes in students with the empowerment framework adopted, students in SL have attained interpersonal, interactional, and behavioral outcomes from their empowerment through experiential learning in SL. Further research is required to delineate the impact of students' empowerment on other SL learning outcomes, including mastery of subject matter, development of empathy, and civic engagement.

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